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# Facing up to ID

Many people are suspicious of surveillance, but using fingerprint, hand print or iris recognition can be good for employees and staff. By **Fiona Nicolson**

**I**n these credit crunching times, it is even more important for businesses to make the best use of their workforce, and to ensure payroll administration is operating as efficiently and fairly as possible.

One of the ways businesses are tackling these goals is by introducing the latest time & attendance systems, backed by identification technology.

Biometric identification technologies, such as hand print, fingerprint and iris recognition, are reliably recording who has turned up for work. This is saving employers the cost of fraudulent labour by eradicating the practice of 'buddy' punching, where a staff member clocks in colleague who is absent.

These methods are also increasingly being viewed as necessary at security workplaces, such as government buildings and nuclear power stations, where it is crucial to know exactly who is in the building.

While the advantages of biometrics are undeniable, they raise some serious questions. Could it be viewed as an extension of the surveillance society, or is it a necessary precaution against fraud and terrorism?

Do such hi-tech techniques have a legitimate place in workplaces that could not be classed as security sensitive?

Mike Hawkesford of Crown Computing sees nothing sinister in the adoption of identification technology. 'I don't know anyone who uses it for surveillance purposes' he says.

'In my experience, biometrics technology is there simply to prevent an employer being treated unfairly by some of its employees. That makes it suitable for most companies, even if their business is not highly sensitive.

'The downside is that it is a slower technique, taking 3-5 seconds to recognise an employee, compared to 3/10ths of a second taken to recognise someone with a badge.'

Mr Hawkesford also believes that the introduction of the latest real-time T&A systems is a positive step for both employers and their workforce.

'Being able to see the details of hours worked and leave entitlement on-line helps people plan more easily. The new systems also vastly improve the efficiency of the payment process for employers, due to the reduction of paper records.

'Another benefit is that the visibility of the data can reduce absenteeism. When an employee knows managers can see how often they've been off sick and if there is a regular pattern emerging of absence on certain days, such as Mondays, it can make some staff members more responsible.'

## Genetic information

While employees may welcome the opportunity to monitor their own payroll and leave related details, some could have qualms about providing their personal genetic information.

However, Ryan Stafford-Jones, hardware development manager at Mitrefinch, reckons that their concerns are unfounded 'There is a common misconception among employees that their fingerprints are stored and, could be used by someone else. But they are not stored. We only identify key points on their fingerprints and measure between these to create a template.

'I can see why employees might be concerned that their fingerprints could be passed on. But as a designer of biometric systems, I know that it is impossible to recreate employees' fingerprints from the template. Not even the police could do that.

'Using biometrics to clock in is really no different from using a key fob or swipe card,' he emphasises. 'I don't see it as a move towards the surveillance society, but I do see it as fraud prevention because it reduces the incidence of 'buddy punching'. It also saves employers money on replacing lost cards.

Could it be viewed as an extension of the surveillance society?

What was science fiction in years gone by has now become reality. People aren't frightened of it

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Some people are worried about a possible impact on their health, as Tristan Spencer, health market director at Smart Human Logistics, observes: 'Some employees fear that biometrics will damage their hand or finger, but the infra red waves are only the same strength as those in a television remote control.'

While the scientific evidence can allay certain fears, employees may have other doubts and questions about why the technology is required. These should be addressed as a priority, says Karen Thomson, director of policy and research at the Institute of Payroll Professionals.

'I am all for biometrics,' she says, adding that communication is the key. 'Some employees will inevitably be concerned that "Big Brother" is watching them and they will feel uneasy.'

'Companies have to get employee buy-in to the concept, by making them feel trusted, and showing them that they are simply trying to improve existing systems.'

However, staff working in an industry such as the nuclear sector, or others where there could be a terrorist threat, the use of biometrics could find be very reassuring.'

The aim to improve existing systems can often be the catalyst for companies deciding to switch to the latest real time T&A systems and biometric identification techniques.

Mitreteck client, Converso, which runs a 180 seat customer contact centre at Southend on Sea, Essex, falls into this category. Lisa Blinkhorne, HR and payroll manager explains: 'Our previous time-logging system was based on swipe cards, which were easy to lose or damage. We constantly had to issue new cards to staff who had forgotten theirs.'

Cost was not the only issue, as Ms Blinkhorne confirms: 'There was the danger that the system could be open to abuse by employees swiping in on behalf of their colleagues.'

Converso addressed their concerns by introducing Mitreteck's web enabled time and attendance system, with biometric readers, based on staff fingerprints.

Ms Blinkhorne believes that the new system has improved efficiency across the HR and payroll process. 'It is no longer necessary to manually check off anomalies in hours worked. Payroll data is now much more accurate and produced more quickly.'

Converso reports that its employees have been

receptive towards the new technology. Other industry professionals are also seeing a positive response from staff too. As Chris Berry, managing director of Computers in Personnel observes: 'We have noticed a general acceptance that technology is moving forward. People see that what was science fiction in years gone by has now become reality. In our experience they are not frightened of it.'

Another company that has benefited from upgrading its systems to the latest T&A technology is Crown Computing's client, Merseytravel. It employs nearly 1,000 people in a range of locations.

Until 2007, many of the staff did not clock on and off. Where time clocks were used, they were up to seven years old and had been unreliable. Holiday authorisation and other absence planning was card based.

Merseytravel appointed Crown to introduce a new and enhanced real-time T&A system. They also invested in new time clocks, linked to the new system.

One of the main areas to have improved substantially is flexitime, as principal personnel officer, Alastair Ramsay explains: 'Each week staff would be sent a printout, which was quite an administrative headache with 300 people on flexitime. Reports had to be printed, collated and then posted, which is not environmentally friendly. Now all flexitime workers can check their hours online.'

He concludes: 'It's a bit soon to quantify the return on investment, but there are definite improvements through freeing up staff time. It's also improving our absence reporting as we are a lot more confident of the accuracy.'

The latest real time T&A systems and identification technology are making substantial improvements to payroll efficiency. And the signs are that more businesses are interested in benefiting.

Payroll services supplier, ADP, which recently launched its time and labour management service, ezLaborManager, in the UK because of increasing demand, has seen a positive response: Programme manager, Jes Turner reports: 'We have already made 10 sales in the last few months and we have many more in the pipeline.'

## FUTURE GAZE: ÜBER-RECOGNITION

Two researchers in Montreal are developing a computer imaging system that has the potential to help crack down on terrorists.

The project is based on running photos from digital cameras through a laptop, using sophisticated, mathematical based techniques. The system scans and measures 15 points on the face, comparing the measurements with an information

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database which enables expressions to be classified.

Lead researcher, Abu Sayeed Sohail says there is a long way to go with the research and that it is too early to suggest it could be used by itself. He does concede, however, that it could assist with pinpointing possible terrorist activity, as he explains: 'Maybe in future, among a group of 100 people, it could be used to identify suspicious movements, to draw a security agent's attention and alert him or her to maybe take a more careful look at five or six of the people.'

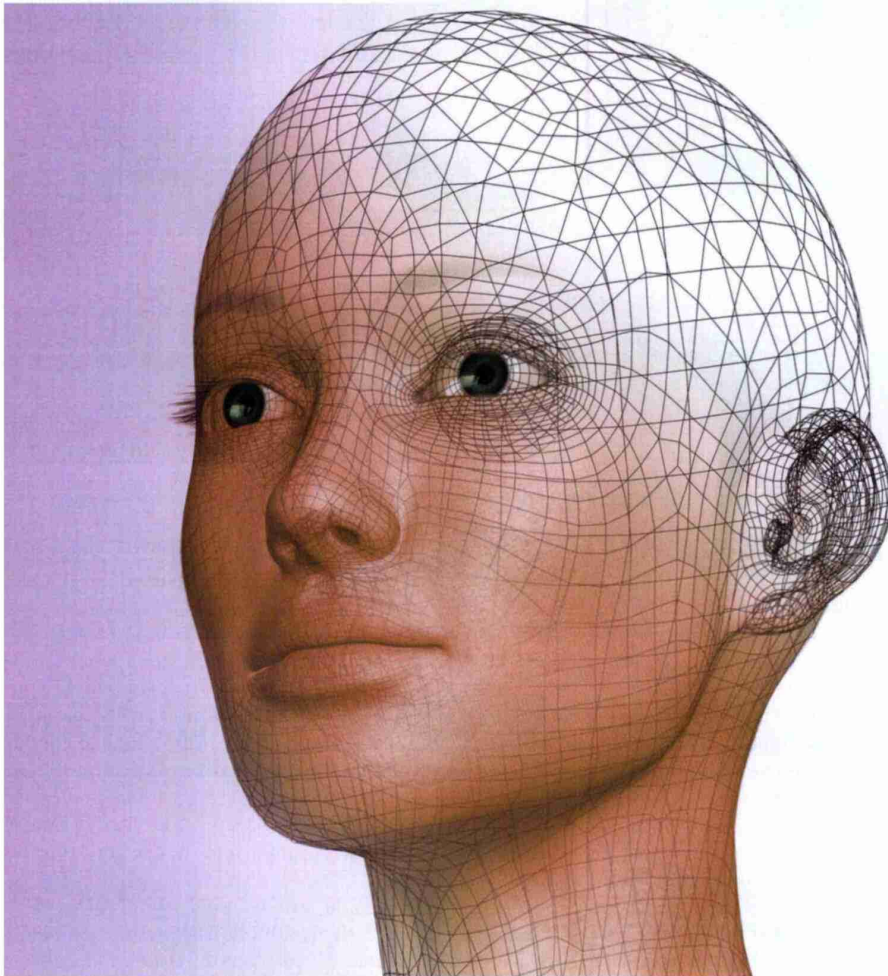
Paul Foote, accounting professor at California State University and IT expert, Rena Hora, say that banks and financial institutions could reduce fraud by using biometric

authentication to support their existing compliance systems.

Foote and Hora point out that the fraud perpetrated at Société Generale, could have been prevented if the bank had operated a biometric authentication system.

They suggest that the addition of a biometric system would have prevented.

They say that it would not have permitted people to use others log in details or to delete records of his trade transactions. It would also have shown that someone had tried to use others' password attempts would have been denied.



#### FACT FILE

**Hi-tech** recognition systems are often essential in high-security areas such as defence-related companies

**Their use** in non-security sensitive operations can be controversial, but can still be done in ways that are beneficial for employer and employee alike

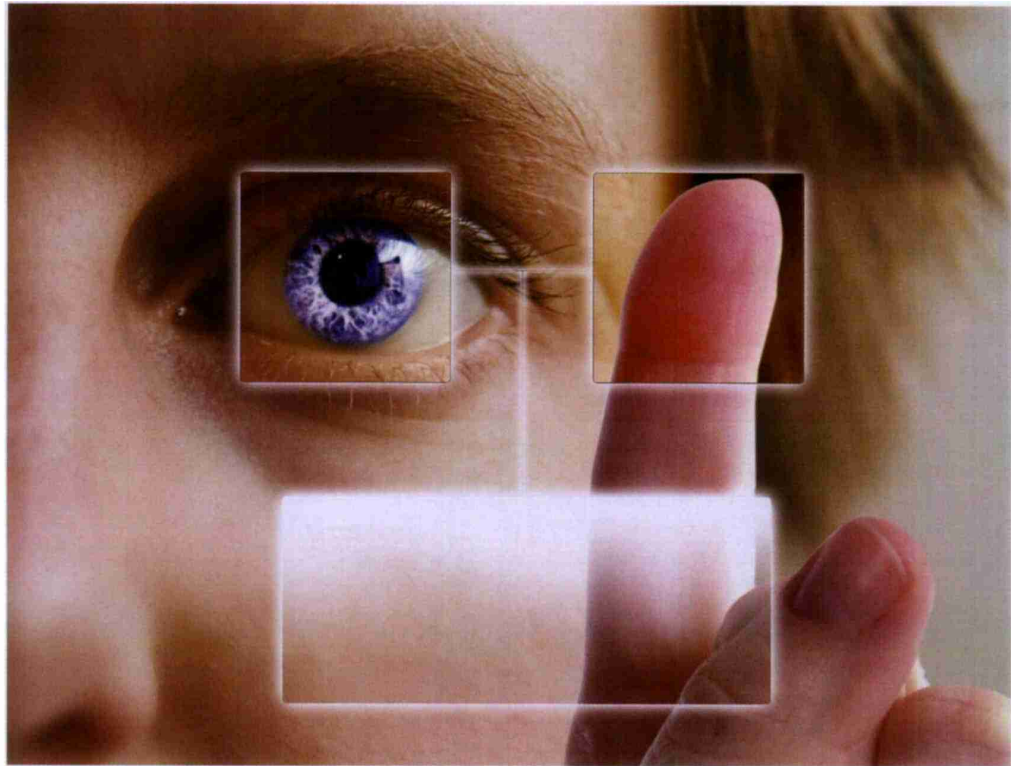
**Development of the technology** is rapid, and many people are familiar and comfortable with it

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Retinal scanners are often used in high-security areas



Hand-print recognition is increasingly sophisticated